

30. A new millenium

Henry: The last time I spoke about the presentation that I made at a National labor history convention in Detroit, and I spoke about my research involving interviews with a large number of Braceros, back in the days when the Bracero program still existed. It seems that this was of interest not only to the people at that conference but it seems to have gone out by the grapevine to other people, and so there arose a kind of cottage industry in research into the Bracero program. And at this point it frequently took the form of instructors in departments of Chicano Studies finding that many of their students were the children of Braceros, or grandchildren in some cases. And so they began writing about this in articles, and books to some extent.

One of these persons was Gil Gonzalez, and he and I developed quite a rapport, and he took part in some of the panels that I put together at labor history meetings. And then, there came a point at which he put together a whole series of essays that he had written on various aspects of the Bracero program. And he had a manuscript which included as one of his chapters what he had heard about my experience with the University of California, and the fact that my research had been truncated and so forth and so on.

I thought that was kind of flattering that he would undertake to do that, but I suggested that maybe I could write that one chapter of his collection of miscellaneous essays, and I undertook to do it. But when I had finished with what I thought was a representative chapter he said that it was too late, that he had already submitted his version to the publisher and nothing could be done to call it back. Well, that was a disappointment. Because it turns out that his version had a lot of factual errors in it, as well as a whole bunch of purple language which I would not have used. So things were a little dicey for a while in my relationship with Gil.

But then I had another idea, which was that rather than limiting himself to interviews with the children and grandchildren of Braceros, that he undertake to ferret out former Braceros who were still alive and well, and were willing to talk about their experiences back in the days when they really were Braceros. Namely, up until the program was ended in 1964. (We're now talking about the early 2000's.) He thought that was a fine idea, and began locating such persons who were now in their seventies mostly. And he became increasingly interested, and began applying for grants to help him branch out, travel down into Mexico itself, and to begin hiring professional people to take video of the interviews with former Braceros.

Well, I helped whenever I was asked to make suggestions or give advice, but mostly I let him do it his way because I didn't want to create differences of opinion that might inevitably arise. And in fact, they did. I had a problem with the very title of his documentary. He wanted to use a title which I myself had used in my magnum opus about my interviews with the University of California research grant. After the original manuscript was confiscated by the University, and I was allowed to keep one or two copies for myself – and I also was allowed to keep the stencils. And as part of the Free Speech movement at Cal in later years I ran off a few extra copies and I gave it a different title than the original had.

I called it “A Harvest of Loneliness”. And Gil used that for the title of his documentary, with my permission. Although he neglected to give it credit in the many, many credits which come at the end of his documentary. Well, I could live with that. But then I learned that he had changed the title in the Spanish version of his documentary and it translated as “Harvest of Sadness”, or “A Sad Harvest”. Which is rather different from “Harvest of Loneliness”.

Well, that’s a relatively trivial problem, because his documentary was pretty darn good. The one really important difference of opinion between us was that I thought he overdid it by limiting his interviews exclusively to Braceros who had been treated badly in this country, and who hadn’t made any money, and who had hated the whole program. Whereas the fact is, that just enough Braceros made money and were treated decently that when they went back to Mexico the word got around that if you were lucky it was a good deal – and that kept the whole thing going. Otherwise, I always heard defenders of the program who said if it’s as bad as you claim, how come we’re overwhelmed with people trying to become Braceros? Well, of course the answer is that they were starving to death in Mexico.

Back to the subject of Gil Gonzalez and his documentary. I was invited to attend some of the early showings of it. There was one in San Francisco, for example. And after it ended I was asked to come to the front of the theater and respond to questions. And that was a great experience for me, because I was able to speak from having observed the program when it was at its height. And from direct observation, which Gil himself wasn’t able to do, and none of the other people involved in the production of this film. That made me feel very good. And then the same thing happened when it was shown on the campus of UC Berkeley to an even larger audience. So, one likes to get recognition, and so that made me feel good as I say.

David: You were also featured in the film itself. To quite a large extent.

Henry: [Chuckles] That made me a movie star.

Now , also in this Renaissance that you might call it of interest in the Bracero program, books began coming out. And some of the authors of these books would interview me and then they would acknowledge my help in their books, and that was another form of recognition that I always appreciated. There was one by a fellow named Marshall Ganz, who had in common with me that he was a sociologist and he had personally worked for Chavez for about 10 or 15 years. And his book was called “Why David Sometimes Wins”; his point being that the Chavez movement succeeded, despite that the forces that the growers were able to mount were overwhelmingly more powerful economically and politically than the Chavez movement – The Chavez union which was always small and struggling for money. That was a good book.

Another was written by a woman named Miriam Pawel and it was called “The Crusades of Cesar Chavez”. She interviewed me not once but twice, and the things which I had helped her with, such as my knowledge of AWOC, turned up in the book, and that always made me feel good. There was another book that came out in the same general period. The first decade of this millennium I’m now talking about – another book called “From the Jaws of Victory” – and this fellow took the view that Chavez was a failure and had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. But he had not interviewed me, and the section that he had on AWOC, which I knew

more about than anybody else still living I think – I found 6 or 8 errors in a single paragraph, and that gave me some satisfaction. To know that his book was so bad and he was paying the price of not interviewing me.

There was a member of the faculty at Chico State named Paul Lopez, who had the idea of doing an anthology of writings by various persons who knew something about the Bracero program from various disciplines. And he asked me to contribute a chapter to his book. And I was happy enough to do that, although it didn't come easily, because the older I got the less fluent I became in writing. Back in the glory days of my having to turn out a commentary every month for KPFA and so forth, words just seemed to flow very easily. But the older I got the more I got writer's block. But I kept at it until I wrote a chapter of 32 pages, which I learned was considerably more than Paul Lopez had bargained for. But he let it stand.

And, the burden of my contribution was to express what a pity it was that social scientists from all different schools overlooked the opportunity to study the Bracero system when it was in flower – if that is the right figure of speech – because it was such a huge program, and was so rich with research possibilities. And yet nobody seemed to care or know about it, even though it was very difficult to ignore because there were 500,000 men involved each year. Back and forth across the border when they were needed, and returned to Mexico when they were not needed. And, too late after the fact. Anyway, that book was published in 2009, if I remember correctly.

David: What's the name of that book?

Henry: The name of that book is "Que Fronteras?"

Now, I haven't mentioned – I don't think I have mentioned a woman named Laurie Coyle. A filmmaker who is quite experienced – she made a documentary about Jose Orozco, a Mexican muralist who is a great favorite of mine and she called her documentary "Man of Fire". Which I later used as the chapter title of my little biography of a farm labor leader named Ernesto Galarzo. Which is part of my book with Joan London, but I digress. Laurie Coyle is now working on a documentary that she calls "Adios Amor", which is going to be a documentary about the life of Maria Moreno; who spent her life trying to support her kids by farm work and occasionally getting an honest pay for an honest day's work because she was one of the organizers with AWOC. One of the few good organizers with AWOC. So anyway, Laurie Coyle interviewed me for what I knew about Maria Moreno, and AWOC in general. And, she just recently got a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities – and she's got a lot of footage of me in there; I don't know how much of it is going to survive but that's something pending which keeps me involved to an extent.

I think I may have mentioned Mary Joy Martin, who lives in Colorado and who became very much interested in the IWW; and specifically in the role of Vincent Saint John, who was of great interest to me, because I thought that he was so important to the success of that movement, which was successful at one time, but since he was very self-effacing and avoided personal publicity he's almost a forgotten man now. But Mary Joy agrees with me that Saint John deserves a biography of his own; she's working on it and I'm helping her in every way that I can,

and she says that when she's finished she will dedicate the book to me. Well, there's a way to go yet. Because she hasn't finished writing it, and then there's a little matter of finding a publisher who feels that there's a market for the story of this forgotten man. But that's another way in which you might say that I'm continuing to be involved.

And then even more recently, I had a communication from a woman named Catherine Powell, who is the director of something called the Labor Archives and Research Center at San Francisco State. And she would be interested in my turning over to her and her archives some of my materials from AWOC days – I wrote something like fifty papers, research papers I called them, for AWOC. And then after I left AWOC, or was asked to leave AWOC, and founded the Citizens for Farm Labor, I continued to write for the magazine that we issued at first every month, and then gradually every 2 months, and later every 3 months, and eventually gave it up entirely. But Catherine Powell would be interested in my placing all of these sorts of things at the disposal of her Labor Archives and Research Center.

And then she added that she thought they would be interested in getting an oral history from me. [Chuckles] I don't know if I would be up to doing this again. I'm sure that they would be scared away if they knew how much time we've put into it.

David: Well, we could just send them a few episodes from ours.

Henry: Yes. That's right, that's true.

So anyway, there's still life in the old boy. And as time goes by, I learn about the people that I have known during the years that I have been a participant in the activities of various kinds – not just the Farm Labor movement. But I was interested in the possibility of a documentary about Jack London, and I would be very interested in the subject of the IWW, but as time goes by all the people that I have been working with over the years – they're dying. And I feel the pressure of trying to get things done because I sometimes think of myself as being the last redwood tree still standing.

Well, I don't know what time it is now. I think I'm going to call an end to it even though it's been less than an hour. And next time, I promise that I will save for last what just might be the closest thing that I'll ever have to a written legacy, and that would be the best of the ninety commentaries that I gave over KPFA. By picking and choosing carefully, I think some of them might prove to be worth remembering. So, until then – Go Warriors!